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Elisa van Joolen (EVJ)

Elisa van Joolen is an Amsterdam-based artist whose work involves appropriating, combining, and printing on existing pieces of clothing to turn them into unique one-off garments. In her series One-to-One, for example, van Joolen inks up garments from one brand and uses them to print on another. The new Frankensteined garment becomes a sort of trademark mashup, calling into question any idea of authorship. In her process, the artist advocates for a new form of "open bootlegging" that is inclusive rather than clandestine, a means of collaboration rather than subversion. For van Joolen, bootlegging is an act of generosity, a process in which participants are invited into a dialogue to exchange ideas on value, ownership, and labor. Interview by Ben Schwartz (BS).

> BS: How do you define bootlegging, and in what ways do you see the gesture as related to your practice?

EVJ: A bootleg is an alternate version, a take on the original, a spinoff. In my eyes, it is something that is often done without consent. To be honest, I have never used the word bootleg in relation to my practice,

because I feel it has a somewhat negative connotation. However, my work is very much concerned with the political gesture of bootlegging through appropriation and subversion. I would like to add to the definition of "bootlegging:" openness, kindness, politeness. Bootlegging to open up, to start a conversation. So nothing is done behind someone's back, or in secret.

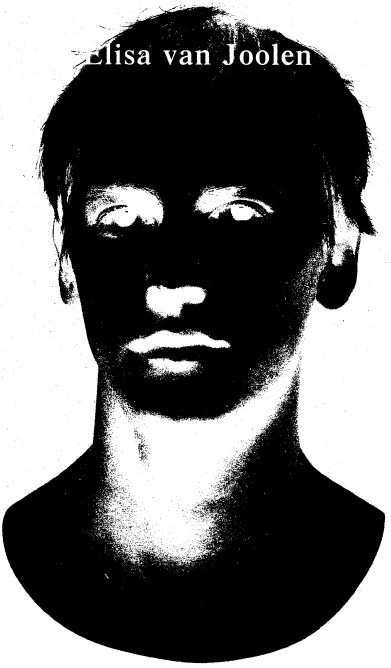
In my practice, I involve people working for different clothing brands. We have a conversation and sometimes they donate samples, dead stock, or archive pieces, which I use as raw material. The conversation is very much part of the "bootleg." It's important for me to emphasize that I like to work with, rather than against, brands. We have seen a lot of *anti-fashion* design or art in the past years, but it doesn't lead us anywhere. I believe that the way forward is to find new ways to work together.

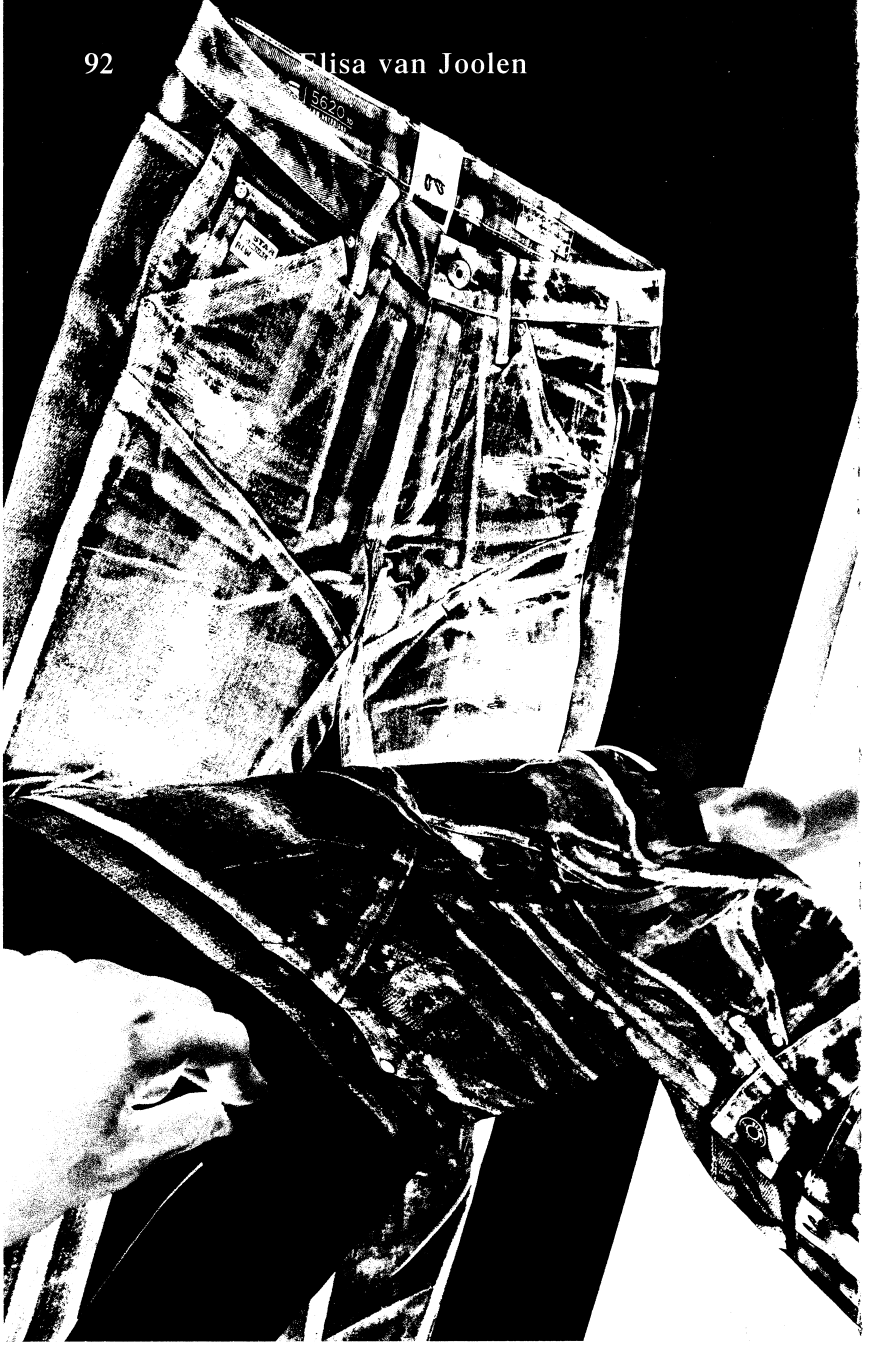
> BS: I really like this idea of a friendly form of bootlegging. So often we think of a bootleg as working against authority or brands—can you talk more about this idea of bootlegging *with* brands?

EVJ: One example of "bootlegging" in my practice would be the 11"× 17" sweaters: a series of garments that consist of multiple brands. When I started this project in 2012, it was already very popular to collaborate in the fashion industry. For example, Comme des Garçons was collaborating with H&M, Opening Ceremony with Levi's. Yet it was always a one-on-one

p. 91: Elisa van Joolen, 11"× 17" (2013). Russell Athletic × Rockwell by Parra × G-StarRAW, donated by Suzanne and Alexander. Photo: Blommers/Schumm

Elisa van Joolen





collaboration: a designer or label worked with a multinational company to make a series of new products, often a cheaper version of the original, marketed towards the masses. It would never be a collaboration involving multiple partners. That was what I was looking for in 11" × 17" — to combine the whole scope of fashion in one item of clothing. Just like how we dress in everyday life, and what our wardrobe looks like: designer items next to mass-produced items. The reality of fashion, if you like.

I started contacting employees working at different brands and explained to them briefly that I intended to reuse a selection of donated pieces and make them into one collection. I explained that the purpose of the project was to bring together different layers of production and value from the fashion industry. With the donated items, I created the following procedure: I cut an 11" × 17" inch piece out of different kinds of sweaters, and swapped these cut out pieces between the different items of clothing. I treated all garments equally (didn't matter what brand it was, each received the same 11" × 17" cuts). The resulting sweaters were an assemblage, composed through a cut-out method from a variety of existing clothing items. Whenever I show the sweaters, I always credit all the brand names that are a part of it.

The main difference between bootlegging in my work and bootlegging in music or video is that the cutting and pasting is more definite. "Cutting" in these latter cases is really a matter of "copying;" when we "appropriate" a certain beat, there is no less of that beat in the world, only more. However, the crew neck

p. 92: Process documentation of the production of Elisa van Joolen's One-to-One series (2018)

sweaters cut up in 11" × 17" are forever gone (or new, depending on how you want to view it). Another key component of my "bootlegging" practice is the importance of materiality. In fashion collaborations such as those mentioned above, the label states only the collaboration, so it remains on an immaterial level; it's about added brand value for the parties involved. It never mentions the actual materials that are combined. I do mention this in 11" × 17".

> BS: I'm curious how your work addresses ideas of originality and authorship and how these ideas might reflect the nuanced differences between copying, appropriation, and bootlegging.

EVJ: I like to blur the lines between these different concepts in my practice. For example, in the One-to-One series, the garments I made are both copies and originals. I inked donated items of clothing and used these as a tool for printing on other pieces. Each item is therefore both carrier and receiver; they serve as a stamp and are stamped on at the same time. So I literally printed one garment on top of the other. By doing this, certain aspects of the clothing are lost. The color, for example, is not transferred in this process, but other aspects are really brought to the forefront, such as the stitching and seams; the fabric structure as well as the size of the garment are all transferred very accurately (which is where the title comes from). The prints are like X-rays: a meticulous registration. This enables a view beyond the mostly one-dimensional image created by the fashion industry. It's a way to observe the garment's actual material qualities in a very detailed manner. It is almost like a process of

"unbranding." Usually a brand's logo is printed on a garment, but now the structure of another garment, from another brand, is also pressed onto the garment.

In the end, I think nowadays there is little difference between bootlegging, copying, and appropriation. The main difference for all three is not *what* you do, but *how* you do this. And the how for me relates to how you involve others (the originals); how open you are about the process of bootlegging, copying, and/or appropriating; and how you communicate this.

This is one of the reasons I made the *One to One Reader* to go with the garments. To me, it is as important as the garments themselves. The reader documents the process and outcomes of the *One-to-One* project and explores the implications and possibilities of this working method in the broader context of the fashion system through contributions by different authors.

This conversation we are having reminds me of artist and educator Corita Kent. She gave her students a beautiful assignment once: "Look at two dandelions for five minutes. List how they are different from each other. Take two leaves from the same tree and do the same. Nothing is the same. No thing is the same. Everything is itself and one of a kind." Through her eyes everything is unique. More radically: there is no such a thing as a copy; everything is one of a kind.

BS: What are your thoughts on luxury brands such as Gucci or Off-White who have begun to take ownership of bootlegs and create "official" versions while still pursuing and prosecuting knockoffs?

EVJ: In the spring of 2017, I was contacted by an Off-White HR manager asking if I would be inter-

ested in collaborating; they wanted me to be a shoe designer consultant for their new collection. I wrote back that I was interested and sent my CV. We emailed back and forth for a while, but at a certain point I didn't receive any emails from them anymore. I moved on and forgot about it until the fall of 2017, when I saw their new sneaker release. The Ten sneaker looked very similar to Invert Footwear (a series of sneakers I "unmade" in 2013). Off-White used the word "SAMPLE" on the exact same spot, and the sneaker had similar "unmade" aesthetics.

In the fall of 2017, I posted on Instagram that I understood why Off-White asked me if I would be interested in working for them. The post took on a life of its own, and people started to comment that my work was a copy of Nike SB's, which I think is hilarious. I used actual SB sneakers. I obtained these sneakers from Sheilah, a Nike SB designer in Portland, Oregon. She sent me a box full of samples that were not fit for production.

So if you talk about the relationship between bootlegging and irony, and in a larger sense bootlegging and capitalism, the sneakers I used for Invert Footwear were real, actual samples, not the ironic take on "samples" Virgil Abloh and his team used. Mind the quotation marks, which are a key design element for the Off-White label. In an interview with the Berlin-based magazine *032c*, Thom Bettridge writes about this tactic: "Quotation marks are one of the many tools that Abloh uses to operate in a mode of ironic detachment. He describes Marcel Duchamp as his 'lawyer,' the art-historical grounds onto which he can absorb preexisting intellectual property into his reference system. Abloh rejects the who-did-it-first mentality of previous generations in favor of the

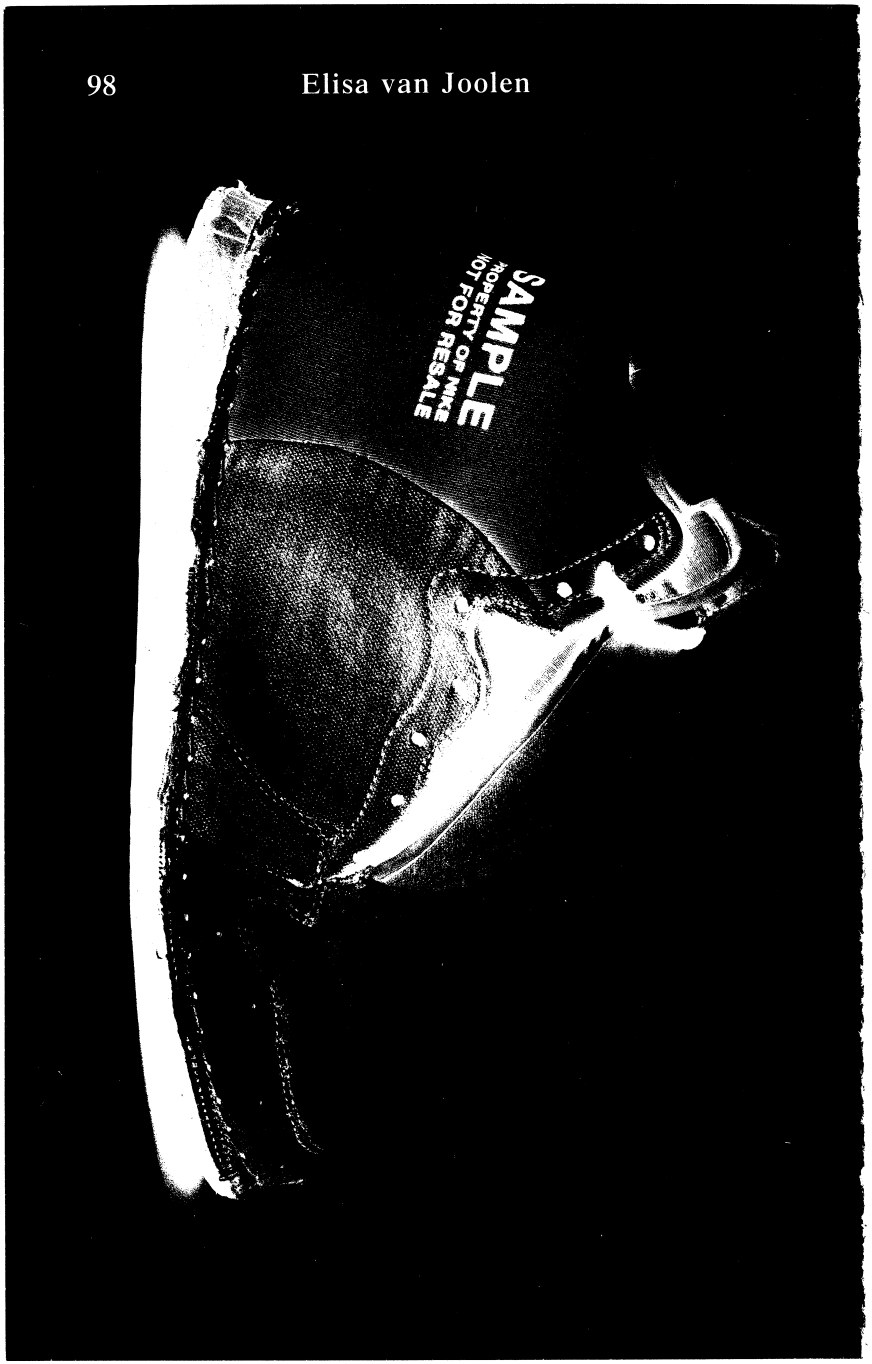
copy-paste logic of the Internet and its inhabitants. His new order is protected by a fortress of irony."

Despite the similarity in looks, the core of my work is very different. For Invert Footwear I turned the sneakers literally inside out and made new soles out of flip-flops, while using the soles of the sneakers to create new sandals. With this treatment I invited people to look at these shoes with fresh eyes, to see them independently from their original brands and accompanying marketing campaigns. The inversion process allowed the stitch lines that are normally hidden within the shoes to emerge. These are the marks of factory workers—working in Vietnam, in Taiwan—and their presence in the production process is made explicitly visible.

I find it interesting that on online platforms like Instagram, Pinterest, and Tumblr, images are available, easy to copy paste, yet the context, the framework of why and how something is made, is not visible. The image is copied but the realness, content, materiality is not. My work is not meant as an ironic take on fashion, but the contrary; I am looking for inclusive, transparent ways to work in fashion. I am more interested in challenging existing value systems in fashion and proposing new ways of working.

BS: I've been thinking about the bootleg as a lens through which one can understand an object or subject better than an original. But I'm also curious how this might apply

p. 98: Elisa van Joolen, Invert Footwear, SP13-MNASKT -732/ 325548 PC (2013). Donated by Jesi and Sheilah Photo: Blommers/Schumm
p. 99: Off-White Court leather high-top sneakers (2017)


SAMPLE
PROPERTY OF NIKE
NOT FOR RESALE

'SAMPLE

to value. When does a bootleg become more valuable than an original?

EVJ: Value is constantly shifting; it is very much dependent on context. Everyone has a different idea of what makes something valuable. $500 is only the monetary value, but what about the emotional value of a garment? I think it is interesting when a bootleg s selling for a lot of money, especially with the knowledge that some garments from different brands are made in the same factory, bootleg or non-bootleg.

In 2017 I (un)made a series garments for the project One-to-One (R. Mariz) that were all produced in the same factory. The specific idea for One-to-One (R. Mariz) was born during a conversation I had with the founders of Bonne Suits. They told me that their suits are produced in the same factory as the collections of other brands like Patta, by Parra, and Ontour.

So the garments are, so to speak, "brought to life" in the same factory, with the same producer: R. Mariz. What I thought was really interesting and beautiful is that these garments are a family in the material sense. So I approached the brands that were producing their clothes in this factory: Patta, by Parra, and Ontour. I explained what I wanted to do, and they were up for it. I wanted to investigate the similarities between these garments through the printing process. As I explained before, through printing items of clothing on other items, details such as the stitching, the seams, and fabric structure are brought to the surface. I wanted to see if there were differences or similarities in the ways the garments were stitched. I find it peculiar that the factory itself is never mentioned, or hardly mentioned, in fashion, while it is such an essential part of the production of clothing.

BS: In today's remix culture, your garments feel particularly relevant to conversations about the complexity of ownership. They seem to float in this nebulous area, unable to be claimed by any of the involved brands. What are your thoughts around ideas of property and ownership?

EVJ: Who owns an idea, product or brand is a very intriguing topic nowadays. For the 11" × 17" project, many brands did not want to donate clothing, and I think that in itself is really interesting. Are there different rules when it comes to working with donated items, as opposed to going to a shop and buying the pieces I want to work with there? Do I only own something when I exchange money for it? I had really interesting conversations with brand representatives about these kinds of things. Some reacted with, "No, you are destroying our whole legacy." Well, how does that work? When is it yours? When is it mine? Who decides?

Title page (p. 88): Excerpt from the 11"×17" identity designed by Our Polite Society